# Hesperia and Glory

Ann Leckie

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# Annotation

Credit Ann Leckie for kicking it old school—not just “let’s fiddle with SF clichés” old school, but “let’s fiddle with SF clichés and cast it in the style of a 19th Century epistolary novel” old school. Which is about as old school as you can get. It’s Ms. Leckie’s debut story, and an auspicious one at that. Just don’t ask her about the well.

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# Hesperia and Glory
# by Ann Leckie

Dear Mr. Stephens,

It is entirely understandable that you should wish a full accounting of the events of the last week of August of this year. If nothing else, your position as Mr. John Atkins' only living relative entitles you to an explanation.

I must begin by making two points perfectly clear. The first is quite simple. The account you have read in the papers, and no doubt also received from the chief of police of this town, is entirely false.

My second point is this: there is not now, nor has there ever been, a well in my cellar.

It is true that ever since my return from the war I have walked with a cane, and stairs are difficult for me. But the house was my great-aunt's, and my parents and I often spent summers here when I was a boy. In those days I marshaled my leaden armies across the packed dirt floor of the cellar, destroying and resurrecting whole battalions by the hour. I know every inch of that cellar floor. I wish to be quite particular about the matter.

Your cousin Mr. Atkins came to my house with Mr. Edgar Stark. I've known Mr. Stark since college, and he is a frequent visitor at my house. I live a quiet life, and am, I admit, somewhat prone to melancholy. Mr. Stark's lively humor and good spirits are a dependable restorative, and for this and many other reasons I value his friendship. It is not unusual for him to bring a friend or two on his visits, so I was not at all surprised when he arrived in company with another man, whom he introduced as John Atkins, an old school friend of his.

To be entirely honest, I found Atkins unprepossessing. His suit was gray with dust and his collar wilted and dirty. As I shook his hand I could not help but notice his listless grip and slightly petulant expression. All of this I put down to a long drive in the heat, but upon further acquaintance it was clear that the expression, at least, was habitual.

Each morning he spent at my home he was up early, before the heat made his room unbearable. After a quick breakfast of bread and jam and cold coffee he would take his place in the living-room on the couch, stretched out, his feet on the cushions, eyes closed, brow knitted in concentration. He arose only briefly in the afternoon to plug in the electric fan and bring the ice bucket from the dining-room to the couch. After supper he went directly to his room, but he slept

poorly, if at all; each night I heard his step overhead, pacing back and forth.

Stark did his best to stir his friend, with no success. Atkins did not like music, either from the piano or the Victrola—the noise distracted him. Books were out of the question, as, he informed us, reading only put other people's ideas into his head. "Well, then, Atkins," I said on the third morning, after another attempt to find something that would entice him off the couch, "what do you like?"

"I like to be left alone," he snapped.

We were only too happy to grant his wish, and went out onto the terrace to sit in a couple of dusty wrought-iron chairs in the shade of an old sycamore. Quite naturally, I asked Mr. Stark for an explanation. He told me that John Atkins was mad. Or rather, that he purported to be mad. He had avoided college, work, enlistment, any sort of responsibility, by pretending insanity. He had deceived various doctors and had spent much of the past year in isolation at the latest doctor's orders. Stark believed Atkins was not truly mad, because the mad did not merely lie about all day. "If you're mad, you should be... mad," he said. The doctor had approved Atkins' departure from the sanatorium and advised that his surroundings for the moment should be peaceful and calm. So naturally Mr. Stark had thought of my house. "I thought you could only be good for him. And he was quite interested in your house, when I described it to him. Particularly the well in your cellar. It's the first time in ages he's shown any sort of interest in anything."

"There's no well in my cellar."

"John and I were good friends at school, before college. Something happened, I don't know."

"There's no well in my cellar," I said again. It disturbed me that he had not seemed to hear what I had said.

"I need another drink," he said, and that was the end of the matter.

* * *

You may wonder that I did not take offense at your cousin's behavior. The truth of the matter is, I had seen something like it before. Some doctors called it "funk" and some "neurasthenia." I called it perfectly natural, if you'd been at the front long enough. Atkins had never enlisted, but whatever his problem, I didn't doubt that it was real enough.

That evening, when I heard Atkins' step, I determined to speak with him, so I rose and took my stick, meaning to make my slow way

up the stairs. Instead I heard Atkins come down, and walk through the dining room out onto the terrace. I followed him.

The night was cool and cloudless, but not silent. Crickets chirruped, and other night insects shrilled and chorused. All the colors were gone out of the bricks, the grass, the leaves of the trees; everything was shades of black and gray. Atkins was still in his shirtsleeves, and he stood on the grass with his face turned up to the sky. He was there long enough for my leg to grow tired, and I seated myself in one of the chairs and waited.

After a while he turned, and as though he'd known I was there all the time he came and sat in another of the chairs. In the dark his face was shadowed oddly, his glasses dark circles where his eyes should be. "Edgar thinks I'm mad," he said, conversationally, as though he'd offered me a cigarette.

"You're not mad."

"Of course not."

"Have a drink?"

"No," he said, and hooked one of the chairs with his foot and dragged it closer with a shriek of iron against brick. "You can bring me some ice." He put his feet up on the chair.

"All out, old man." Actually the ice man had been just that morning, and I'd taken more than usual, because of my guests. "You'll have to wait until tomorrow."

He made a slight movement that might have been a shrug. "I'm not like just anyone else," he said after some minutes had passed. "I *matter*."

"Ah," I said.

"Things have gone terribly wrong, and only I can fix them. It's all my brother's fault. My half-brother, really. Asery." The last word was drawn out, filled with hate. "His father led a rebellion against the king of Hesperia—my father, Cthonin VI. He failed, of course. His head rolled down the palace stairs and into the square in the capital, and the body was buried under the steps, so that every day Hesperians would have him underfoot. I'll never understand why his son didn't join him, infant or not."

"And where is Hesperia?" I asked.

"On Mars, of course."

"Of course," I said. "How foolish of me."

He told me then of the antiquity and superiority of Martian civilization, and of Hesperia, which was the greatest of Martian nations. Each Hesperian learned, from his mother's knee and throughout his schooling, the importance of right thinking. "On Mars," he said, "we understand that what one thinks makes the world."

“Do you mean to say that each of us makes our own world with his thoughts?” I’d heard the idea before, usually at two in the morning from young men drunk with a heady mix of champagne and philosophy, and whose lives had yet to run up very hard against reality.

“No, no,” said Atkins testily. “Nothing so trivial. There’s only one universe. But that universe is formed by thought. If it were left to undisciplined minds, the world would be chaos.”

“Your mind is disciplined,” I ventured.

“I was bred to it. I am Cthonin Jor, Prince of Hesperia. Some day I will be Cthonin VII. But first I must defeat Asery.”

I asked him then to tell me the tale, and thus he began:

* * *

In Hesperia (here I set down his words as best I remember them) the canals run deep and wide, and straight as death. The dirt, thick and heavy and scarlet, makes the water the color of blood. Some canals in less blessed regions have run dry, but in Hesperia green grows thick and lush thirty miles on either side of the broad waterways that criss-cross the land.

The canal called Fortunae does not run through Hesperia proper, but it is important nonetheless. It runs northward from the southern ice to a series of falls that cascade down into the Lake of the Sun, which is nearly a sea, wide and shallow. In unimaginably ancient times it was believed that on the day of creation the sun itself rose from that lake. It was the site of a tremendous temple complex, nearly all of which has disappeared without a trace after so many thousands of years. But one part of the temple still stands: the Wheel of Heaven, six hundred sixty-nine chambers, each built side to side in a great circle under the lake. The ring turns by the width of a chamber each day, and there being only one entrance a single room is accessible each day, and that same room, once its day has passed, cannot be entered again until the six hundred and sixty-nine days, which is the length of the Martian year, pass once more. The entrance is reached through a cave behind the falls.

The Fortunae comes out again at the western shore, at a headland called the Cape of Dawn. On this headland is one of the many pumping stations that send the water of the Fortunae on to where it meets the canals of Hesperia proper, in mountains to the west. Near the station is a town, and this is the administrative center of the province, which is, of course, governed by Hesperia.

It was there that I had been sent by my father, and there that my

brother Asery came to me nearly a year ago as I sat in my chair on the steps of the governor's palace, my counselors beside me. Before me was a great plaza, paved with the local brown stone in various shades, depicting a coiled serpent surrounded by a border of alternating jasper and copper in which the artist had cunningly concealed the drainage grates so necessary for a large, flat surface near so much water. Across the plaza, to the north, was the canal come again out of the lake. On the east was the lake itself, and to the west a barracks, and the town beyond. The air there is always filled with the sound of rushing water, and the rumble of the great pumping station.

Some of my soldiers were playing a ball game in the square in front of us, and I was proposing a wager on the outcome with my vice-governor when the voice of the crier interrupted us and Asery came before me. He is a tall man, nearly as tall as I am, with dark hair and gray eyes inherited from his father, and he carries himself with the same arrogance. On this day he was dressed in plain garments, covered with red-brown dust, as though he were some homeless wanderer just come off the road, not a gentleman seeking audience with the governor of the province, and a prince.

"Welcome brother," I said. "Please sit with us."

"I will not sit," he said.

This sort of disrespect was like Asery, but I am a patient man. "Couldn't you even bathe between here and... wherever it is you've come from? Our mother would be shocked to see you."

"Our mother is not easily shocked," he answered. "After all, she bore you without any noticeable display of shame."

My counselors, who had been whispering among themselves, fell silent. Even the ballplayers stopped, and the ball bounced away and then rolled to the edge of the plaza, stopping and spinning on a grate. They moved together, closer to where I sat, and where my brother stood before me. Asery did not move, nor did he look behind him where they gathered.

"I hope you've not been thinking of taking up your father's ambitions," I said.

"I have not come to take up any ambition. I only wish to speak with you."

"You've made a bad start of it," I told him. "But then, your family's arrogance is famous."

"The contrast with the habitual modesty and diffidence of the house of Jor is marked," he said, with the slightest of bows. "I stand reprimanded.

That was better. "What can I do for you?"

"You can restore the Fortunae to its original course." Now, this had been the pretext for his father's rebellion. At one time another

canal had flowed north from the upper shore of the lake, and from there into Tharsis. “A hundred years ago Hesperia annexed this province and turned its waters westward. Now the lakes and rivers of Tharsis are dry, and its fields are desert.”

“Nothing stops them from building another canal. Or buying the water they require. Isn’t Tharsis famous for its silver mines? Aren’t their artisans the most marvelous workers of metal on Mars?”

He exhaled sharply, derisively. I couldn’t read the expression in his gray eyes. “I wish I could make you see what Mars is really like, away from the canals, away from your palace.”

I realized then what he had come to do. I stood and signaled the soldiers, and with a cry Asery pulled a sword from under his dusty shirt and sprang forward. I stood to face him and drew my dagger.

Our blades met, and over his shoulder I saw the soldiers turn as the grates around the court lifted and fell clanging to the stones, and up out of the drains came men in dusty red-brown, swords raised. In a moment they had ringed the plaza, even in front of where I stood on the palace steps.

Asery was a wily and treacherous swordsman, and I had to fight with all my attention. I did not have time to look over the plaza, or think of my counselors who had been next to me, but it was evident that the soldiers from the barracks had joined us, because from time to time I heard their voices raised in the battle cry of Hesperia: *For Hesperia, and glory!* And though he had a sword and I had only my dagger, we fought until each of us was exhausted, and I, anticipating his feint, disarmed him and sent his sword spinning across the stones of the plaza.

It was then that I looked up from the fight and saw that the battle was lost. My own soldiers lay dead or bound, and my vice-governor was held by two rebels.

I turned and ran up the palace steps.

* * *

Atkins paused, and before he could continue I asked why he had not merely thought Asery dead on the spot? Or willed his enemies’ swords to turn into flowers?

“You don’t believe me,” he accused.

“On the contrary. I’m just trying to understand.”

For a few moments the only sound was the night insects, and the soft sighing of a breeze in the tree leaves. “They would never have believed that their swords would suddenly turn to flowers.”

“So they all have to believe?”

"Not all," he said. "Just most. If someone more powerful has some other vision, or if everyone around you remains unconvinced, your efforts will come to nothing. You see how important it is, the right kind of thinking." He sat up straight, and brought his feet down off the chair in front of him. "You see how malicious it was, for Asery to suggest that Tharsis was badly off."

I allowed that I did.

"The discipline is not only in bringing one's will to bear, but in keeping in mind the proper order of things."

I had no reply, and in a moment Atkins continued his story.

* * *

I fled through the palace to the stables (he said), where I mounted a raptodont, a stallion with splendid black feathers. These are nothing like your Earth horses. They are two-legged, nearly six feet from clawed foot to powerful shoulder, and nearly twice that from dagger-toothed snout to the tip of the long, muscular tail.

I rode away from the palace, safely past the town and away into the countryside. I might have followed the canal west, but I would be too easily caught. The lake lay to the east, and north was Tharsis—I could expect no help there. South then.

The southern Fortunae was too obvious a route, so I rode southwest through the gentle grasslands that surround the Lake of the Sun, an ocean of green starred here and there with flowers of pink, blue, and yellow. After an hour or so the grass gave way to a desolate, rolling landscape of blue-gray moss, rocks showing through like bones, and I turned south and rode with the wind at my back.

As I rode I tried to think of some way to defeat Asery. I could work towards small things that would, in the end, lead to his undoing, but what? And as I thought, another idea came to me. What if I did not work with the future, but the past? What if I brought my will to bear in a time before anyone could believe or disbelieve in his existence? Was it even possible? I had never heard of anyone doing such a thing before, but the idea pleased me so well I began straightaway. Let Asery's father never have conceived him! And his father and his father, for good measure, all the way back to the founder of the line. To this end I bent my will.

Eventually I turned southeast, into grassland again, and soon after reached the shores of the canal. The wind out of the north had increased, and now blew cold and hard, whipping and flattening the grass and chilling me, but just over the next rise I knew I would see the bulk of a pumping station and beside it the white walls of the

barracks. I urged my mount faster up the incline.

And then pulled hard on the reins, coming to a sliding halt that nearly overset me. Ahead was no station. The wind-tossed grass and the waters of the canal simply ended, as though by the stroke of a sword. Beyond was a desert of dry dirt and rocks, where the wind threw up red-brown clouds and whirlwinds. Behind me was grass, water, and blue sky. Ahead was lifeless rock, and a sky turned red with dust. As I watched, a foot of green crumbled into dirt and blew away—the line was advancing!

Did Asery have so much power, and was this, then, his goal? Not merely the overthrow of the royal house of Hesperia, but the destruction of all life on Mars?

At the speed that line of destruction was advancing, I could not possibly reach Hesperia in time to find help. My campaign to erase Asery from the history of Mars had clearly not succeeded. My only hope—Mars' only hope—was to kill him outright, no matter how difficult that might prove. I turned my exhausted mount and rode north.

I rode all that evening and into the moonless night, the jeweled stars thick overhead, until nearly within sound of the great falls my mount collapsed in mid-stride and fell dead on the grass. I left it where it had fallen, and ran on.

When I could see the glint of starlight on the lake, and the falls were a constant thunder, I stopped and knelt in the tall grass for a brief rest, and to take stock. This saved my life; no sooner had I sunk down than I heard the faint sound of voices. As I knelt, hardly daring to breathe, the voices came closer.

"That's the last of you. Keep a close watch! It's worth our lives if we let him escape."

I did not recognize the voice, or the next one. "Are we so sure he's nearby?"

"We found his mount not far from here, dead but still warm. You know your orders."

"Kill him on sight." Two voices together.

Here was a dreadful pass! Crouched down in the grass, mere yards from my enemies, who had just expressed their determination to kill me. I could not stay where I was for long—the rising sun, or the most cursory search, would reveal me. On the other hand, the third man seemed to be leaving, perhaps to report to Asery himself! If I could follow him unseen...

I lay belly-down and crept forward, hoping that until I was past the sentries any movement of the grass would be attributed to the rising wind. I quickly lost any sound of the officer, but at least I knew what direction to take, and was, I judged, going to pass the two

sentries safely.

But at the last moment my luck deserted me. With a thud an arrow buried itself into the ground inches from my shoulder. I immediately pushed myself upright and ran, and another arrow hissed past me. Stealth was impossible now. My best hope was to escape into the caves of the falls.

The shouts of my pursuers behind me, their arrows flying to the left and right of me, I gained the path that leads to the largest of the caverns. It is narrow, and the water-covered stones are cold and slick, and I had to slow somewhat to avoid slipping and tumbling to the water-pounded rocks below. Still, I heard Asery's men behind me, and I did not dare to stop and see if it were only the first two or if others had joined them. I plunged ahead, and finally into the entrance of the Wheel of Heaven.

No Earth monument can be as grand as the ancient ruins of Mars! The cavern entrance is plain at first, but as you go deeper the ceiling rises and is lost in darkness, though the lights that in those far-off days lit the hall still light it now. The walls of black stone narrow to a corridor, on the walls of which are ancient figures of men and beasts in bas-relief, men that are long dead and turned to dust, beasts the like of which Mars has not seen in ten thousand years. In the eerie gleam of the ancient lights the figures seem to be on the verge of movement or speech. Near the entrance to the Wheel is a shadowed side-path, a turning that leads into a maze of tunnels that honeycomb the bluff. If I could gain that I would be safe.

The corridor ended in a broad step of rough black stone, smoothed at its center, where so many feet have trod. In the wall at the back of the step was a doorway, a rectangular hole with no frame, and darkness within. Black stone blocked a third of the doorway, and as I watched the stone slipped forward just the smallest amount. I must have ridden longer into the night than I had realized, and it was nearly dawn, and the day's chamber passing on.

I knew the path I sought was along the wall to my left, but as I turned to search for it, my pursuers came into view, nearly a dozen armed men. I was out of time! Quickly I made for the black step. "Stop him!" cried a voice, and arrows rained down, but I was through the inexorably closing door. Captive in the Wheel of Heaven for a year, but safe from Asery meanwhile.

* * *

"The year is nearly past," Atkins said. "When the chamber opens again I will return."

“And where will you find this chamber?” I asked. “We’re nowhere near Mars.”

“The well in your cellar is the opening,” he said.

“There is no well in my cellar.”

He made that almost-shrug again. “You aren’t enough to trouble me, and no one else has been down there for years.”

“Are you certain?”

He laughed, and said nothing else, and so I bade him good night and left him sitting on the terrace. I went into the kitchen, meaning to make myself a drink, but when I opened the ice-box I found that the ice I’d bought that day wasn’t there.

The events of the next day are quickly and easily told. This part of the official account is accurate: that morning I saw Atkins go down to the cellar, the only entrance to which is by steps leading down from the kitchen. I heard a terrible scream, as did Mr. Stark, who came running from the living-room. He was down the steps before me, and moments later I heard him shout, “Help! John has fallen into the well!”

The police came, and several of the neighbors, and all were in the cellar for some time, and when they came up I was told that they had been unable to retrieve Mr. Atkins’ body from the well. I was assured that his death was unquestionably accidental, and that I should not feel in any way responsible. When they had left, I made my way down the steps, to find only the packed dirt floor of the cellar covered over with a layer of dry, red-brown dust.

I swear to you that I am sane, and that every word I have set down here is true. Of course, it is impossible that your cousin was indeed a fugitive prince of Mars—John Atkins was born here on Earth, and Mr. Stark had known him since boyhood. But it is also certain that he went down into my cellar and disappeared without a trace. How am I to understand these events? I have pondered the question at some length, and have reached certain conclusions.

Who among us does not yearn for some noble purpose? Who would not wish to take the part of the prince and the hero, in an ancient and romantic world where men war openly and honorably with sword and bow? And who can blame John Atkins if, discovering a way to make this desire a reality, he threw aside all else in life but this one aim? Who would grudge him Hesperia, if he could attain it?

I say plainly—I would. And I do.

Let a million readers of dime-novels lose themselves between the pages of their books, and let them rise refreshed and ennobled by what they find. But let that dream become a reality—how many Princes of Hesperia can there be? There is only room in the story for one. What of the rest of us? And if such a thing is possible, what of

Earth? Who might re-shape our world with his imagining, and to what ends?

This is what I think happened: John Atkins did succeed in opening a door to Mars. But the Mars he found was not the Mars he imagined. Reality delivered the ultimate rebuke to his tampering, and at the last showed him not the waters of the Lake of the Sun and the verdant grasslands surrounding it, but the dry and lifeless Mars that would assert itself even as he tried to banish it with his fantasy. So I interpret his story. So I must believe, for the safety of my own world.

I am not a prince, or a noble anything. I can only do my small part. I've swept the dust from the cellar floor, and disposed of it. One of my neighbors has brought a chair down for me, and here I sit. Mr. Stark has gone, and I've had no visitors for some time, except the doctor, who is clearly concerned. And I can't explain myself—how could I, without sounding completely mad? I am as sane as anyone, perhaps saner than most. I align myself with the real. I am witness to the truth.

There is not now, nor has there ever been, a well in my cellar.